

James Earl Ray takes truth to grave

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) —

James Earl Ray, the ex-convict who confessed to assassinating the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and then insisted he was framed, died Thursday, frustrating civil rights leaders who fear they may never learn the truth. He was 70.

Ray died at a hospital of kidney failure and complications from liver disease while serving a 99-year prison sentence for the 1968 slaying.

"America will never have the benefit of Mr. Ray's trial, which would have produced new revelations about the assassination," said King's widow, Coretta.

Mrs. King and her son Dexter have said they believe Ray was innocent. Some other civil rights leaders, including the Rev. Jesse Jackson, have not gone that far, instead saying that they believe Ray took part in the assassination but that he did not act alone.

The Rev. Hosea Williams, a former King lieutenant, called Ray's death "the epitome of an American crucifixion."

"Anyone with an ounce of brains who has done any studying or research on this case knows James Earl Ray was used by the federal government," he said.

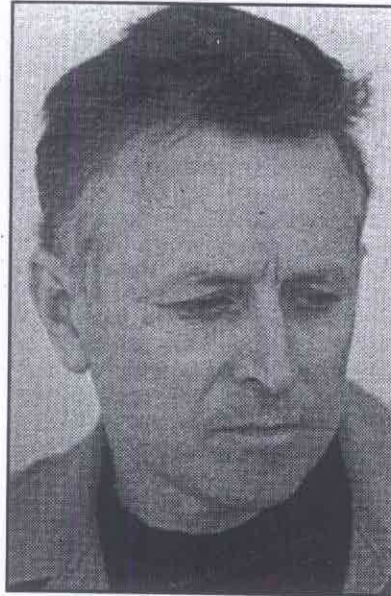
The King family is pressing Attorney General Janet Reno to create a federal investigative commission with the power to subpoena witnesses, grant immunity and file charges against suspected conspirators.

But as far as Ray and the courts are concerned, it's over. Prosecutors in Memphis, where King was shot on a motel balcony, said Ray's 30-year battle to take back his guilty plea died with him.

"About the only thing I can say is I believe the history books will accurately record that James Earl Ray was the killer of Dr. King," said William Gibbons, the lead state prosecutor in Memphis.

It was 30 years ago this month when King was killed by a sniper at the Lorraine Motel. He was in town to support striking sanitation workers. The April 4, 1968, assassination touched off race riots in more than 100 cities and set off one of the biggest manhunts in U.S. history.

Ray, a fugitive from a Missouri prison where he was serving time for robbery, was staying in a flop-



JAMES EARL RAY

house nearby. He was captured in London two months later.

By pleading guilty in March 1969, he avoided the possibility of a death sentence. But Ray recanted three days later and argued for years that he was coerced into making the plea.

He claimed he was set up by a shadowy gun dealer he met in Montreal and knew only as Raoul, and said he was off changing a tire when the shooting occurred.

Investigators have never established any connection between Raoul and the slaying, and numerous courts agreed with prosecutors that there was no evidence anyone else was involved. No one else was ever charged. Over the years, the courts repeatedly upheld the guilty plea.

Ray's efforts resulted in an unlikely coalition between his family and King's.

"I am convinced that Ray was involved in the assassination of Dr. King, but he did not act alone," said the Rev. Jackson, who was with King when he was shot. "Conspirators are still on the loose."

In 1978, the U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded that Ray was the killer but a group of racial bigots in St. Louis who reportedly had put a \$50,000 bounty on King's head might have been involved, too.

Weisberg says death deepens King mystery

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By BRUCE HAMILTON
News-Post Staff

When James Earl Ray died Thursday, the chance of proving his innocence in the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were seriously harmed, according to local author Harold Weisberg.

"Ray didn't kill King and they know it," he said. "I think it's a tragedy they didn't let him get a liyer so our system of justice could work." The legal system "is not working and that's a danger to the country. It's a grave danger."

Mr. Weisberg, 85, published "Frame Up: The Martin Luther King-James Earl Ray Case" in 1971. In 1992, he published "Who Killed Martin Luther King?" He is also the author of several books on the John F. Kennedy assassination.

He worked for Ray's defense team in 1974 and has long maintained Ray's innocence. During a two-week evidentiary hearing, the defense team proved the alleged assassin could not have fired the shot that killed Dr. King in 1968, he said.

Ray never admitted to the crime. He pleaded guilty in March 1969, avoiding conviction and the possibility of a death sentence. But he later said that he made the plea under duress. "He did not confess. He

refused to confess," said Mr. Weisberg.

The prosecution could not place Ray in Memphis, Tenn., at the time of the murder, or match the bullet to his rifle, according to Mr. Weisberg. But the judge ruled Ray was not entitled to a trial because of the plea. He did not consider guilt or innocence, Mr. Weisberg said.

The King family, including Coretta Scott King, Dr. King's wife, requested a trial and have said they believe Ray is innocent. Last year, a Memphis judge ruled that the fatal bullet didn't match Ray's alleged weapon. But Ray was never allowed a trial.

Instead, he languished in prison. He developed cirrhosis of the liver and was hospitalized repeatedly. "This is a man who has been asking for a trial for 30 years," said Mr. Weisberg.

If the government had granted Ray a trial, "it would have shut him up for ever," he said. But "they don't have a case against him. That's the only reason he didn't get a trial."